

James Frazer: Magic, Religion and Science

This essay will illustrate and appraise Sir James Frazer's evolutionary explanations of magic, religion and science, as depicted particularly in his famous work *The Golden Bough* (1890-1915). This requires a brief elucidation of Frazer's intellectual thesis within the context and influence of European evolutionary theories.

Sir James Frazer (1854-1941) maintains that the object of his work is to discuss 'questions of more general interest which concern the gradual evolution of human thought from savagery to civilization'. In this respect, Frazer posits a series of phases or stages of human intellectual development and then explains magic, religion and science in an anthropological, rhetorical narrative that outlines his evolutionary, linear scheme. He says that 'the higher thought...has on the whole been from magic through religion to science'. The assumption that there is something called 'higher thought', whose most developed 'scientific', rationalistic knowledge Frazer alludes to possess, means that magic is not only older than religion and science in human history but it 'represents a ruder and earlier phase of human mind'. It is 'a spurious system of natural law', 'a fallacious guide of conduct', 'a false science' and 'an abortive art'. This description of magic tells more about Frazer's intellectualistic enterprise that presumes anthropological eminence based on the political, military and technological superiority of an imperial power. This is why magic, according to Frazer, exists among 'the ignorant and superstitious classes of modern Europe' and 'among the lowest savages surviving in the remotest corners of the world'.

Frazer asserts that 'magic arose before religion in the evolution of our race'. The evidence is that 'the aborigines of Australia, the rudest savages as to whom we possess accurate information, magic is universally practised, whereas religion...seems to be nearly unknown'. Frazer then says that 'all men in Australia are magicians, but not one is a priest'. It is, however, questionable that a scholar like Frazer, who spent most of his life in British libraries and who never travelled outside Europe, could claim to have possessed 'accurate information' about 'the aborigines of Australia'! Frazer definitely does not say whether 'the aborigines' think of themselves as 'the rudest savages' or what they practise is not a 'religion' or 'religious' from their perspective. But it seems that Frazer endeavours to typify the dominant culture of colonial society that perceives its own life style as evident that those native people of Australia are the 'rudest savages' who represent the primordial mentality of humankind. Thus Frazer says,

Our Ideas...are the fruit of a long intellectual and moral evolution, and they are so far from being shared by the savage that he cannot even understand them when they are explained to him.

There are two problematic issues here. First, Frazer's idea of magic is culturally manufactured by an evolutionary theory that hinges on the supposition that so-called primitive or savage peoples represent earlier stages in the development of 'modern' society. Thus one 'deprives oneself', as Claude Lévi-Strauss says, 'of all means of understanding magical thought if one tries to reduce it to a moment or stage in technical or scientific evolution'. Second, Frazer does not recognise the nature and role of symbols in human life and therefore he presents 'his famous theory of magic as rooted in pseudo-scientific formulations' which characterises 'primitive, infantile, or neurotic thinking'.

Frazer continues to say that 'as time goes on, the fallacy of magic becomes more and more apparent to the acuter minds and is slowly displaced by religion'. How 'the acuter minds' discovered 'the fallacy of magic', how certain people acquired 'acuter minds' or who replaced magic by religion is something that Frazer does not explain. What he says is that 'the magician gives way to the priest'.

Frazer thinks that at 'an earlier stage the functions of priest and sorcerer were often combined or...were not differentiated from each other'. But 'with the advance of knowledge', 'prayer and sacrifice assume the leading place in religious ritual; and magic...is gradually relegated to the background and sinks to the level of a black art'. Magic then is 'regarded as an encroachment...on the domain of gods, and as such encounters the steady opposition of the priests'. At a late period, when a distinction between religion and magic emerges, 'sacrifice and prayer are the resource of the pious and enlightened portion of the community, while magic is the refuge of the superstitious and ignorant'. In this sense, Frazer's theory of religion relies on attributing imbecilities to 'superstitious' and 'ignorant' people.

Frazer then poses a question about the causes that led 'a portion' of humankind 'to abandon magic as a principle of faith and practice and to betake themselves to religion instead'. Frazer argues that 'a tardy recognition of the inherent falsehood and barrenness of magic set the more thoughtful part of mankind to cast about for a truer theory of nature and a more fruitful method of turning her resources to account'. 'The shrewder intelligences' according to Frazer, 'have come to perceive that magical ceremonies and incantations did not really effect the results which they were designed to produce'. Frazer does not demonstrate how 'a portion' of 'thoughtful' and 'shrewder intelligences' could change their

perception of magic and how they could discover 'the inherent falsehood and barrenness of magic'. One presumes that if magic was a worldwide phenomenon, as Frazer says, those 'shrewder intelligences' were a minority and unable to challenge the dominant culture and substitute magic by religion unless there were other factors that diminished the influence of magic and enhanced the power of religion.

It appears that Frazer is not interested in those socio-political factors and historical circumstances that were responsible for the emergence of religion(s). Rather, he insists that the discovery of the inefficacy of magic led to the belief in 'mighty', 'unseen beings' to whom 'man now addressed himself, humbly confessing his dependence on their invisible power, and beseeching them of their mercy to furnish him with all good things, to defend him from the perils and dangers ...and finally to bring his immortal spirit...to some happier world, beyond the reach of pain and sorrow'. This generalised statement means two things. First, at the earliest stage of human history, in the age of 'savagery', the human beings did not believe in 'mighty', 'unseen beings' or in immortality. Second, religion is defined as 'a propitiation or conciliation of powers superior to men which are believed to direct and control the cause of nature and of human life'.

Frazer then says that the transition from magic to religion 'proceeded very slowly, and required long ages for its more or less perfect accomplishment'. The verification for this 'very slowly' transition is curious and dramatic. Frazer argues that

the recognition of man's powerlessness to influence the course of nature on a grand scale must have been gradual; he cannot have been shorn of the whole of his fancied dominion at a blow. Step by step he must have been driven back from his proud position; foot by foot he must have yielded, with a sigh, the ground which he had once viewed as his own. Now it would be the wind, now the rain, now the sunshine, now the thunder, that he confessed himself unable to wield at will; and as province after province of nature thus fell from his grasp...man must have been more and more profoundly impressed with a sense of his own helplessness and the might of the invisible beings by whom he believed himself to be surrounded.

Thus religion began 'as a slight and partial acknowledgment of powers superior to man'. One may argue here that when the human beings came into existence, they were more frightened by nature and more aware of their immanent weakness before they could develop tools, cultivate lands and build houses.

But Frazer expounds that submission to the divine will in all things affects only 'higher intelligences', while small minds 'cannot grasp great ideas' because they 'hardly rise into religion at all' and 'cling to their old magical superstitions'. Thus in a Frazerian sense, religion is basically the idea or the innovation of 'higher intelligences' not of 'small minds'. This implies that magic and religion are distinguished on the basis of the intellect: 'intelligent' people incline to religion, while 'ignorant', 'savage' people stick to 'magical superstitions'. In this way, the evolution of religion is concomitant to the development of 'human mind'. For instance, 'animism' is replaced by 'polytheism' because the latter represents a higher rational maturation.

Nonetheless, religion, in Frazer's work, 'is posed as the unfortunate but necessary stepping-stone from the follies of magic to the wisdom of science'. And although religion is associated with despotism, 'a broad view of history', Frazer says, 'will probably satisfy us that both despotism and religion have been necessary stages in the education of humanity'.

Frazer argues that 'the keener minds' 'come to reject the religious theory of nature as inadequate'. These 'keener minds', of course, belong to a certain kind of European scientists and philosophers who think that religion, 'regarded as an explanation of nature, is displaced by science'.

Frazer then attempts to justify the superiority of science to magic and says that 'the order laid down by science is derived from patient and exact observation of the phenomena themselves'. Frazer does not demonstrate how 'science' had laid 'order' or how the 'exact observation of the phenomena' is carried out. Rather, he says,

The abundance, the solidity, and the splendour of the results already achieved by science are well fitted to inspire us with a cheerful confidence in the soundness of its method. Here at last, after groping about in the dark for countless ages, man has hit upon a clue to the labyrinth, a golden key that opens many locks in the treasury of nature. It is probably not too much to say that the hope of progress –moral and intellectual as well as material – in the future is bound up with the fortunes of science, and that every obstacle in the way of scientific discovery is a wrong to humanity.

The 'dark', in Frazer's vocabulary, refers to the 'countless ages' of 'magic and religion', while 'science' has provided 'a golden key' for humanity to explore nature. The problem with this scientific understanding, according to Mircea Eliade (1907-1986), is that Frazer thinks that 'the reaction of the human mind to natural phenomena is uniform'.

It is noticeable that Frazer concludes that 'magic, religion, and science are nothing but theories of thought'. This indicates that actual histories, actual politics and actual socio-economic situations seem irrelevant to Frazer. Rather, he affirms that science has not ended the evolutionary process and anticipates that 'as science has supplanted its predecessors, so it may hereafter be itself superseded by some more perfect hypothesis'.

Sir James Frazer attempts to delineate the intellectual boundary between magic, religion and science. He thinks that magic was the primordial stage of human intellectual development, a sort of primitive science, in which people imagined that they could influence their lives by means of magical objects and incantations.

When the 'savage' magical phase produced fiasco, people envisioned supernatural beings to assist and safeguard them and therefore they switched to religion. Then the belief in the supernatural appeared to be illusion and eventually there came to be the knowledge of science and perceptive human minds became rational and tentative.

Thus Frazer does not postulate the actual mechanism by which human history passed from magic to religion and then to science. He does not view the ideas of magic, religion and science as ways of interpreting the universe in the human endeavour to grapple with the mystery of existence. His substantialist thought raises serious questions concerning his presumption of the piecemeal evolution of human thought from *their* 'savagery' to *his* 'civilisation'. This thought reveals an intellectualist enterprise feasible exclusively in a relativist, modernist, colonial context. It is an elaborate representation of an imperial narrative of anthropology which constructed a fictitious world of 'savage primitives' and 'rational, civilised' people.